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ABSTRACT

Age-old problems of poverty and ignorance persist in South Asia. Educational strategies, compatible with cultural norms, are needed that will motivate and prepare the rural communities of this region to take the lead and to implement activities for growth. Furthermore, these strategies must have appropriate support--people, money, and media. Four major educational problems confront the rural areas of South Asia: illiteracy, quality, relevance, and efficiency. Some changes in schooling could be made--for example, reaching out to the children through mass media rather than having them come to central areas for schooling. The educational systems of the countries of South Asia share many common problems, including rising costs in the face of budgetary constraints, lack of curriculum renewal, lack of textbooks, lack of trained teachers, inadequate level of compatibility between educational systems and the world of work, inadequate supply and use of teaching aids leading to low quality and low systemic efficiency of education, and inadequate access to good education for many groups, especially the rural poor and the disadvantaged. Distance education based on the use of modern communications and multimedia materials could be used to reach some of these people. Such strategies should be researched in order to progress toward education for all. (KC)

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Resource Paper

LIBERATION OF THE LEARNER: A SELF-RELIANCE STRATEGY FOR EDUCATION

MOTILAL SHARMA

A Round Table Conference on
Distance Education for South Asian Countries
(6-8 November, 1989)

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LIBERATION OF THE LEARNER: A SELF-RELIANCE STRATEGY FOR EDUCATION

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A. Introduction: A Vision for The Future

1. Without vision, the prophets say, a nation perishes. So it is with our global community. As we span the next 10 years towards the 21st century, decisions about our future must be made now. But these decisions must not begin with the traditional approach of designing and specifying physical targets or material wealth. Our global vision must start with the prioritization of the values that ensure the fullest development of mankind. The primordial beneficiaries of this values decision ought to be the most underprivileged members of underdeveloped societies: the poorest and the most destitute and deprived members of our citizenries - the rural poor, particularly children and women. We have learned from experience that the roots of the values of man are in man himself. Worthwhile human values do not come from external forces, but come from our evaluation of the fundamental values of mankind, which in enlightened societies are basically founded on precepts of self-reliance and self-esteem, not GNP or highways or supermarkets.

2. Within the next 55 days, we enter the 1990s. Yet it is most painful to realize that the age-old problems of poverty, ignorance, malnutrition, and disease continue to plague millions of villagers in developing countries. It is even more disturbing to note that these problems persist even as, within the past three decades, mankind has made some of the most tremendous advances in science, technology, genetics engineering, computing and mass media. Indeed, not only the current generation, but the next generation, and generations yet unborn, will be hard pressed to understand why almost three-quarters of the world's 4.5 billion people will see the year 2000 A.D. bringing with them these ancient handicaps. With a total population of about 1.3 billion, of whom 900 million live below the poverty line, these issues are particularly pertinent to the seven countries of South Asia.

3. At the heart of this crisis is our inability to confront the issue of ignorance. It is accepted that the worst enemy of self-reliance and self-esteem is ignorance. It is ignorance that breeds poverty, disease, crime, and runaway populations. These in turn spawn further ignorance and the vicious cycle goes on unabated for centuries. The most potent weapon for self-reliance therefore is the education of people in general - education modelled on visions, aspirations, capabilities of the people concerned, in the context of their social-political-economic environments, traditions and cultures. Ignorance should be tackled with serious plans for action, and not with empty rhetoric. The immediate challenge facing government leaders is to devise practical

strategies, compatible with cultural norms, that will motivate and prepare the rural communities to take this lead and to implement activities for growth. Furthermore, these strategies need to have appropriate resource support: men, money and media.

4. At present, up to seventy per cent of the about 1.3 billion people of the South Asian countries live in rural villages. Estimates suggest that up to 60 per cent of rural families in these countries are living below the poverty line. The most impoverished group of all is women. I will confine myself to four major problems of education and literacy confronting the South Asian countries at present: illiteracy, quality, relevance, and efficiency. Without detracting from the achievements and usefulness of the schooling system, my overriding concern is how to promote self-reliance as a strategy for education thus liberating the learner to achieve the ultimate goal of education for all. Such liberation will ensure that once equipped with self-learning capabilities learners will become their own best teachers and will not be dependent upon the provision of a school and a teacher to acquire knowledge. Ignorance is the singular great enemy; liberation of the learner is the ultimate mission; and self-reliance the strategy for education.

5. For educationists, it is difficult to accept the fact that traditional education systems, which accomplished much of the progress and advances we enjoy today, have not been able to cope with the vast, complex, ever-changing, and constantly-expanding problems of the past 40 years. In the past when populations were small, costs for constructing schools and classrooms were relatively affordable and mass education not considered necessary; and the nation's brightest and best talents were either teaching or administering our schools. Certainly no one can deny the quantum leaps achieved by the traditional schooling system in bringing literacy, science, scholarship, and professional disciplines to the nations of the world. Times have changed however. The education budgets available to governments of developing countries around the world have already been stretched beyond limits. Education resources, both human and non-human, have been increasingly diverted to other social, economic, and political sectors. It appears that education no longer draws the most capable talents. Traditional formal education, which is confined to the school, is locked in space, time and tradition. It is unable to draw on the full potential of modern technology since its basic resources - the teachers and school administrators - have become entrenched in the traditional environment of the classroom, with its limited range of lectures, blackboard and chalk. When one talks about liberation of the learner, obviously, this should also mean the liberation of the teacher and the school from old precepts and traditions. If we are to achieve the goals of "Education for All" by the next decade, we must begin to re-examine conventional ideas as the first step towards achieving genuine progress. Such progress depends on encouraging educators to break down traditional attitudes towards formal education and to encourage more flexibility in the use of space, time and modern technologies.

6. One of the new strategies of education could entail, not having children come to the school, but having the school reach out to the children and enter their very huts. This is now possible because of the pervasive influence of broadcast media, particularly radio, which can reach virtually all corners of the world today. The means of listening to radio broadcasts is now almost

universal. Farmers, in tea plantations in Sri Lanka, in paddy-fields in India and Pakistan, tending to sheep, cows, and goats in the countryside, are now able to listen to radio broadcasts day and night at prices within their reach. The hut, the farm field, the fishing canoe, the village gathering place - can all constitute the new classroom, the new school and can create genuine access to educational opportunities. The use of radio for educational purposes allows students, especially girls, to continue their farm and home chores without disruption, while they assimilate lessons from broadcasts. With the additional provision of distance education support services, including print materials, scheduled tutorials and lectures on-site, group-work sessions, etc., students can develop enthusiasm and commitment for learning with the ultimate goal of becoming self-reliant. Such a scenario need not be only a dream, it could be a reality, even today.

7. It is essential that educational policymakers re-examine their commitment to traditional formal schooling, and consider seriously the efficacy and cost-efficiency of multi-media distance education technologies. To take just one example, in order to achieve universal primary education by the year 2000, Nepal estimates that it will require the building of an additional 5,244 schools and will have to train a further 33,748 teachers in addition to upgrading the 36,876 teachers, who are currently untrained. Realistically, what are the chances of achieving this objective through the traditional formal school system? The financial resource implications alone are surely debilitating. With the economies of scale inherent in mass distance education, however, the achievement of universal primary education is within the bounds of reality, provided the policy planners are willing to consider alternative modes of instruction such as distance education, incorporating multi-media technologies.

B. Problems and Issues in Education

8. The educational systems of the countries of South Asia share many common problems including rising costs in the face of budgetary constraints, lack of curriculum renewal, lack of textbooks, lack of trained teachers, inadequate level of compatibility between education systems and the world of work, inadequate supply and use of teaching aids leading to low quality and low systemic efficiency of education, and inadequate access to good education for many groups especially the rural poor and the disadvantaged, including women. Since 70 per cent of the populations of South Asian countries live in rural areas, DMCs are finding it difficult to fulfill the goal of universalization of primary education, and are also not able to meet the increasing social demand for education at all levels for all target groups through the formal structures of education. The illiteracy rate in the region continues to be high and education for all could well remain a distant dream for the region as a whole.

9. In the 1990s, distance education, based on the use of modern communications and multi-media materials, is predicted to be the major new movement in human resource development. The spiralling costs of formal education, including the hiring of full-time teachers, the construction of classrooms, the provision of furniture and equipment, and site-development of campuses, will force the governments of DMCs to turn to alternative educational systems. The inherent cost-effectiveness of multi-media, distance education suggests that this mode of instruction is the best, if not the only available

alternative. The experiences of distance education institutions in Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and many other parts of the world support this conclusion. Furthermore, the scope for satellite-based distance education should be examined in this context since the space system offers vast advantages over that of the terrestrial systems, especially when warranted by the area and diversity of the country concerned. Also, the satellite media are ideal for implementing cooperative multi-national programmes in distance education.[1]

10. Through the use of new communications technologies, access to good educational programs can greatly be extended to large audiences in rural and remote areas. This can be done at low cost, with tremendous flexibility in subject matter content, in locations served, and with a choice of a narrow or wide band formats. There are two new technologies, namely satellite communication and fiber optic cable, that have dramatically enhanced educational capabilities, but others such as the VHF terrestrial radio telephone, cellular radio technology and various new mobile communications techniques are making important contributions. Tele-education is seen today as an enhancement and a supplement to conventional distance education systems. Satellite and fibre optic transmission technologies are in fact complementary. Satellites are still best for broadcasting to provide for rural and remote access, while fibre optics are well suited to linking centres of learning, university campuses, etc. Fibre optic-based educational networks can also be "piggy-backed" on to public telecommunications networks at a modest cost. Today the future for educational transmission costs is very promising. Fibre optic cables can now be made for about $1 a foot, microterminals complete with microprocessors and printers can be purchased for about $2,000. Within the next 10 years satellite transponders could probably be purchased for as little as $250,000. In short, the reduced costs of technology could make a large number of educational services available to more and more people on a global basis. Where appropriate we must examine, evaluate and utilize the many new transmission and programming capabilities that are now available from advanced communications technologies, especially satellites. Effective coordination through regional cooperation could help realize the potential of such remarkable technologies.

11. In the school system, face-to-face teaching inevitably entails a complex mix of different levels of competence in instruction and wide variation in student performance. Different teachers, with different preparation, background and motivation, will provide different norms and standards of performance. Even if good teachers are available, one is never sure whether they are willing to teach in rural schools in the countryside. Improvement in the quality of education depends on making available to the poorest students and most far-flung schools the best available teaching talents of the country. This problem can be handled quite effectively through distance education since this mode encourages the mobilization of the best and most competent teachers in a given subject or discipline. School curricula, textbooks, and instructional materials and practicum designs are made by experts sitting comfortably in air-conditioned offices in the capital city - far removed from the everyday problems

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1 Sundara Rajan, Mohan, Satellite Applications in Distance Education Through TV and Radio, Distance Education, Vol. I, Asian Development Bank, 1987, pp.421-491.

and interests of students, parents, teachers, and the community in the rural setting. As such, no distinctive curricular differentiations are made for male and female populations or for urban and rural situations. Distance education can accommodate this problem, by placing the learner at the centre of the curriculum development process. By focusing on the actual learning environments and specific needs of disadvantaged groups and by making the best use of today's technologies, we can make the necessary quantum leaps in education. There is much to gain from the intelligent use of appropriate technologies, especially broadcast communications based on satellite installations. Such technologies, when used in the context of well-structured distance education systems, can provide cost-effective delivery systems which can reach out to the most far-flung and deprived communities in the rural areas while at the same time enriching formal school systems.

C. Distance Education: A Pathway to The Future

12. Distance education, unlike formal schooling allows the educational system to progress without waiting for economic development. Traditionally expensive campuses and schoolhouses could not be built without first waiting for communities to advance in their economic and physical wealth. This approach led to policies that deprived remote and poor communities of basic educational facilities particularly in the rural areas, where the largest number of people lived and worked. Distance education, based on the use of a multi-media strategy, can reach out to millions of poor families. It can help them in their livelihood and employment by providing them with livelihood skills, farm-production technologies, fishing-methods, food-processing knowhow, and hundreds of other employment-enabling tools and techniques. Distance education has the capacity to reach thousands and thousands of poor communities, at costs much less than formal schooling.

13. Going beyond employment and livelihood, distance education could be used to teach dozens of relevant topics, including community mobilization and organization; rural leadership training; home industries; village level planning and development; home food processing; backyard economic enterprises; environmental protection and conservation; family values and solidarity; population education; local government administration; setting up and managing farmers' credit unions and productivity cooperatives; and conducting local training programmes using local people and local materials.

14. In gender-structured societies, education is crucial in ensuring that males and females achieve at least an equal share of economic rewards, power, prestige and authority. In this sense, distance education has powerful implications for women in development. It is particularly important for the liberation of women, who continue to be more likely than men to experience severe limitations on personal time and freedom for a significant period of their adulthood. Women, particularly those who are disadvantaged by religious, socio-economic and geographical conditions, find distance education an appropriate solution to their educational problems. Distance education allows women to study at home; at times and hours when they are free or at leisure. They do not have to go to a school everyday, since school comes to their doorsteps. They can listen to some of the best lecturers in the whole country on audio cassettes via inexpensive battery-operated radio sets. Occasionally, they can attend village

study sessions, where local women-facilitators and local female teachers (trained in distance education) can conduct tutorials, show films and documentaries and slides using battery-operated projectors, movie equipment and sound speakers. The possibilities for promoting the liberation of women are so diverse, numerous, and relatively inexpensive compared to current practices that the limitations are set only by one's own imagination and creativity.

D. Liberation of the Learner

15. It is in this area where distance education is most potent. Distance education is directed towards the learner. Its focus of attention is the learner and the process of learning, unlike traditional pedagogy where the concentration is on the teacher and on teaching. This is because the elimination of a fixed time (daily classes) and a fixed space (the schoolhouse) enables learners to learn at their own convenience, without disrupting the everyday necessities of work, whether at home, farm, village, factory, school, or office.

16. It is clear that the distance education materials, tools and technologies chosen must suit the needs of learner - not the preferences of the teacher. Distance education encourages teachers to see that what really matters is facilitation of learning, not dogmatic instruction. Distance education informs learners that learning depends on themselves, on their own motivation to learn, on their commitment to learn the lessons on their own, with guidance and support from tutors and learning materials. Distance education requires an act of self-discipline. It is a purposeful testing of self-reliance and self-determination. It informs learners that not all knowledge and facts come directly from the teacher. It informs them that most knowledge, perceptions, and insights, come only from their own actions. In the end, the distance learner comes to realize that the best teacher is really oneself, and that personal efforts in this connection are the most important. In essence, distance education leads to the liberation of the learner, since liberation and knowledge are not only compatible but interdependent. It provides opportunities for self-determination, which can lead to the development of self-reliance and thereby to the enhancement of self-esteem and personal dignity. And through the liberation of the individual comes the liberation of the nation.

E. Need For Regional Cooperation

17. The expansion and diversification of distance education programs to meet the growing demand for education at all levels requires new strategies to minimize costs. There is a need for pooling expertise and sharing resources in the field of distance education in the South Asian region in order to maximize benefits. By the year 2000, the population of the region will far exceed the current estimate of 1·5 billion. Such a high rate of population growth, compounded by the increasing cost of providing education, demands cost-effective solutions. Many countries are now faced with the complex task of dealing simultaneously with rapid educational expansion and the reshaping of their education systems, in a context of increasingly severe resource constraints. The economies of scale inherent in distance education systems could make a significant contribution to educational development in the South Asian region. In sum, distance education presents new weapons to tackle old problems. As a movement, distance education can indeed go far in the war against poverty by

improving the status and role of women in development and in the liberation of all learners. The establishment of a regional mechanism which could promote distance education by pooling expertise, and by determining suitable country strategies through regional cooperation, would be a timely step.

18. The major weakness of distance education in the South Asian region is the lack of consistent quality in educational provision. Institutions are not equally endowed in terms of physical facilities, professional staff, management systems and academic programs. The wide variety of geographical, social and cultural contexts in which distance education institutions must operate further exacerbates the problem of providing consistent quality across a wide range of academic programs. Another problem is the shortage of well-qualified staff in distance education, since available human resources tend to be spread too thinly across a range of courses resulting in diminished quality. Institutions could well make the best use of their limited resources by specializing in a narrow range of disciplines, while at the same time collaborating with other institutions through regional cooperation, to provide a range of quality offerings to meet diverse needs.

19. Despite the logical appeal of sharing distance teaching resources, there is little evidence of extensive international cooperation in the distance education arena. Active collaboration between operators of distance education systems has the potential to make a significant contribution to cost effectiveness through economies of scale. While there is little scope to achieve economies of scale in the processes of student assessment, student support or system evaluation, there is considerable scope for this in the cooperative design, development, production and use of instructional materials. Such a quest for increased efficiency could entail: (i) eliminating unnecessary overlap in the production of courses; (ii) ensuring maximum students for a common course acceptable to several countries; (iii) maximizing the use of existing sophisticated instructional materials design, development and production infrastructures; and (iv) creating a centralized curriculum and instructional materials development and production facility. A combination of such initiatives would lead to greater cost-effectiveness, since the cost per student unit could be reduced while the total resources and effort dedicated to the achievement of instructional quality could be increased.

20. Most existing distance education institutions in region are extremely busy and hard-pressed to meet local demands, which often lead to a lack of consistent quality in educational provision. A regional approach could possibly help in providing consistent quality in education in a cost-effective way across a wide range of subject areas. Genuine regional cooperation is required to achieve this goal. Such a regional approach would enhance the prospects of genuine collaboration without prejudice to individual cultural aspirations; efforts could be coordinated to avoid overlap in courseware development, and a central database of instructional resources could be developed and maintained. The activities of such a regional institution, along with the training of trainers in distance education, would need to encompass curriculum design as well as instructional design, development and production. A regional distance education institution would also be responsible for dissemination of information, distribution of resource materials, conduct of training programs to meet region-specific training needs and the coordination of research activities. It would

be economical to conduct research on the use of newly evolved teaching methods at a regional level for the benefit of all countries in the region, which may not be able to afford to go it alone. The setting-up of such a regional mechanism for distance education would avoid the potential pitfalls arising from communication difficulties and capacity constraints. Further, a proposed centralization of instructional materials development on a regional basis could provide an appropriate agency for negotiating beneficial financial arrangements with government agencies (in relation to copyright, and sales tax) and more particularly with the suppliers of production and delivery hardware (e.g., video systems, audio cassettes, satellite transmission systems, and microcomputers). In short, regional cooperation would have three main thrusts of activity: (i) collection and dissemination of information regarding existing distance education materials and programs in the regional countries including the Asian Satellite service; (ii) client services in the areas of supply of materials, training of core staff and consultancy services; and (iii) research and development services for the improvement of learning materials and methodologies.

21. There are, of course, inevitable risks associated with the proposed development of a mechanism for regional cooperation involving up to seven countries. Such a project is extremely ambitious by any standard. Efforts to generate multi-national distance education in the region have been tried before and have failed. Successful bilateral cooperation is difficult enough to achieve. The potential problems of engendering agreement between up to seven participating nations would appear to present a major challenge to those involved. Difficulties will no doubt arise on a whole range of issues, including basic academic questions such as the content of the curriculum, the current level of achievement of prospective target groups in different countries, and the responsibility for the quality of the contributions to courseware development from various countries. Similarly, a number of legal issues relating to copyright, ownership, pricing policies and distribution of revenue from student fees all appear likely to cause headaches. Even the management skill and technical expertise to manage such a complex operation presents a major challenge, which could put the project at risk.

22. The potential benefits of overcoming or at least ameliorating the massive problems of educational provision facing the governments of the region might well make the risk worthwhile. Perhaps, there is no viable alternative. International financial institutions could well be persuaded that such an investment is worth the risk, given the sizeable investment by many countries to establish the Commonwealth of Learning (CL), which is attempting to generate multi-national distance education on an enormous scale, literally worldwide. Comparatively speaking, the proposed regional mechanism for South Asia is of a relatively modest scale! The key point is, however, that the underlying rationale for these cooperative initiatives is essentially the same. This rationale is basically a function of the economies of scale inherent in mass distance education and the associated benefits of increased capacity to produce relevant courses of consistent quality in a reduced timescale. This is not to deny the existence of genuine problems and potential pit-falls. Most of these issues, however, can be reduced to either matters of attitude or a question of resources. Most of the previous efforts aimed at multi-lateral cooperation have failed due to lack of financial resources, not because of a lack of motivation or goodwill among potential contributors. Indeed, previous efforts are

symptomatic of the positive commitment to cooperation that appears still to exist in the countries of the region. Further, the potential benefits are so significant that it is difficult to see the project failing due to lack of commitment. Similarly, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that there is now sufficient experience and expertise in the management of large scale distance education operations in the region and other parts of the world to ensure a reasonable chance of success for the project. While acknowledging the potential pit-falls, it seems reasonable to suggest that there is a sufficient chance of success to warrant taking the first step.

F. Specific Questions

23. In the light of the great benefits to be derived from the expansion of multi-media, mass distance education, this Conference could usefully examine, among other issues: (i) changing trends in education and training to identify opportunities for engendering genuine regional cooperation; (ii) institutional capabilities and expertise available in national agencies to identify those institutions, which can contribute much-needed inputs for evaluating the potential for a regional mechanism and delineate areas in which each institution/country could make a useful contribution to active collaboration in distance education; and (iii) alternative international, regional and national organizational structures appropriate for regional cooperation, including the financial contributions and inputs of participating agencies and Governments.

24. The major questions which need to be examined in the context of the establishment of the proposed regional mechanism are:

(i) What are the objectives and potential benefits of regional cooperation in the field of distance education?

(ii) What should be the form of regional cooperation? (a) Is there a need for a centralized institution? or (b) Can cooperation be achieved through informal arrangements? To what extent is it necessary for governments to be involved?

(iii) Will the initiative for cooperation come from governments or from the institutions? How can cooperation be achieved? The means of achieving (ii) (a) and (b) should be examined. If (a) is preferred, possible locations and the willingness of the Government concerned need to be explored. If (b) is preferred, the frequency of meetings and the mode of coordination need to be specified.

(iv) Can some established distance education institutions be designated as regional resource centers? Do their facilities need to be upgraded?

(v) What should be the role of international educational institutions (e.g. UNESCO) and financial institutions (e.g. ADB, the World Bank)?

(vi) To what extent can the capital and recurrent costs be identified in the light of the specific objectives of proposed regional cooperation?

(vii) Who will finance the capital and recurrent costs of the proposed program? If it is to be financed under co-financing arrangements, who could be the co-financiers? Will the Governments be ready to contribute their share to such a program? (Here you may like to consider financial arrangements in various regional institution such as the Asian Institute of Technology, Bangkok, the Asian Institute of Management, Manila, and the Colombo Plan Staff College, Manila).

25. Only through gaining specific answers to these questions can we make progress towards our goal of providing education for all. It is clear that traditional education systems alone have not even the remotest chance of achieving this goal. Distance education offers perhaps the only alternative means of achieving fair and equitable access to educational opportunities for all sections of the populations of South Asia. It is only through distance education that governments can overcome the financial and resource constraints that bedevil their efforts to promote social and economic development through education. It is only through distance education that the individual learner can be given the opportunity to overcome traditional social, economic and religious constraints, and thereby to become a liberated, self-reliant person, who can make a useful contribution to national development. If such ideas are to become realities, it is imperative that we make a concerted effort to define the precise parameters for the facilitation of effective and efficient regional cooperation in distance education. It is therefore with genuine sincerity that I ask you to give serious consideration to the issues and questions that I have raised, in our endeavours to combat ignorance through distance education initiatives, that have real potential to achieve education for all.